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ABSTRACT

Prior to World War Two, Slavic studies in America treated history, literature, and language as isolated disciplines and often neglected the study of Russian literature written after 1917. The pragmatic necessities of the war questioned the relevance of this traditional approach and specialists appeared, concentrating their efforts on the recent Soviet period exclusively. Thus, Russian studies became distinct from Slavic studies. This article explores how integration of former traditional and fragmented approaches in Slavic studies and the more recent Russian studies has begun at a number of American colleges. (RL)

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TEACHING RUSSIAN CIVILIZATION[1]

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Despite the brisk development of Slavic studies during and since the war, the prediction is made that they have no future in this country. The Slavic world has changed into the Soviet world whose Slavic aspects are rapidly dissolving in the universal problems of Communism, Dictatorship, and Totalitarianism. It is therefore no longer a subject for Slavists, but for teachers of political and social sciences who are better equipped to deal with such matters.

According to this concept, Russia as a historical nation is incidental to Communism, as the Arabic world was incidental to Mohammedanism or German culture to Nazism. Is it really necessary to study Goethe to understand Hitler, or to translate Dante in order to foresee another Mussolini? It seems that the more we studied the German and Italian past, the less we were able to understand their present. Russia interests the American only as the embodiment of an idea which threatens American liberties. Can Pushkin help him to recognize the aims of Stalin? The Russia of old is to the Soviet Union what ancient Rome is to Italy of De Gasperi and Togliatti. Let the dead bury their dead.

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The field of Slavics is thus located somewhere close to the field of Classics. We can teach language and, with certain reservations, history and literature. But more and more the language will be taught by a general linguist assisted by native informants, for our technique is deemed obsolete. We are thought to be limited to the speech of Pushkin and Tolstoy, and the American wants to know how Molotov uses it. If history and literature are left to us this is primarily for the reason that their references lie in the past, and they are not directly related to the current issues at stake.

[1] Based on a paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages, December 28, 1948, in New York City.

One may object that the present situation in Russia is a mixture of old and new and one must know something of the former in order to evaluate the latter. But the opponents will point out that no one would care to know what features of the 1929 model are repeated in the 1949 Chevrolet. The fact that some aspects of the Soviet system can be traced back to the time of Cyril and Methodius is of little consequence. No one will study Henry Ford's life or General Motors' history to see how the new automobile operates. All that the American wants to know is how the Soviet system operates. The approach is pragmatic. Only those features of Russian civilization are studied which are relevant to the new political and economic fact which is the Soviet Union today. America, we are reminded, is in need of quick specialists, not of ponderous philosophers. There is no time to waste. World War III may break out in a couple of years.

Consequently new techniques are being developed for teaching Russian subjects, and new men prepared outside the organized Slavic field. Their strong points seem to be—at least this is the way they put it—integration of data within specific fields of observation, absence of bias and prejudice, and "an alert feeling of practical American interest." Slavic scholars are under pressure to change their methods or go out of business, leaving their field to others.

II

The new trend has been widely, and sometimes severely, criticized. Narrow and shallow specialization, before a general background is acquired, is meaningless and dangerous to the rightly understood American interest. Indeed, how would we feel if the study of America were to start with the New Deal? We would shrug our shoulders at an expert on American affairs who knew how many votes were cast at the last elections or how the Stock Exchange operates, but had heard nothing of Monroe, Emerson, and the American Frontier. How can he be competent to deal with America if he does not know what kind of people we are? He should know that the American character was not formed in Washington, D. C., during recent years, but has come out of "long inheritance, environment and experience." His approach to America would be

judged irrelevant and, in so far as foreign policy is concerned, unpractical.

But we start Russian studies with the Five-Year Plans and the Stalin Constitution of 1936. What do we know about the Russian character? About Russian inheritance, environment, and experience? One can hear from the American expert, produced by the new educational machine, that Peter the Great died in the sixteenth century, having made a testament for world conquest; that the liking for uniform is one of the permanent elements of Russian culture; that political exiles crowded out the natives in Siberia, and annexed it to the Russian Empire; that Russian citizens were not protected by law before the Revolution; and other such nonsense. These and the following are not fancy examples, but are taken from life and from documents collected in different colleges. Our spines would shiver if certain techniques, developed for the study of primitive societies, were applied to the study of American behavior. Yet, the American is told that among the European peoples the Russians are the only ones who swaddle their babies very tightly, thus depriving them of muscular cognition during the very important first nine months of life; of course, as has been observed among certain tribes, they will make up for this period later, and develop a violence complex. This will explain the Moscow trials and concentration camps. Students are told that it is not necessary to know Russian to take a dictionary and find that Russian has no word for *privacy*, which would mean that the Russians have never known what privacy is.

One may point to a tightly swaddled Christ painted by Giotto on the walls of the Arena Chapel in Padua. However questionable the source of information about the Russian baby may be, the early muscular cognition did not eliminate violence in the rest of Europe. German and French have no direct term for English *privacy*, and even the Texans have no word for *prostor* (boundless expanse, vast horizons, and complete freedom of moving about). Strangely enough, Russian has no word for *autocracy*, and yet—.[1]

[1] *Samoderzhavie, samovlastie* by which the word *autocracy* is currently translated, refer to power, not to government. On the other hand, the idea of "democracy" is expressed by *narodopravstvo* which is distinguished from *narodovlastie*. Cf. *samoderzhavny gospodin Veliki Novgorod* while *Novgorod* was a classical example of medieval democracy.

All this, of course, is beyond the scope of study, and Russian life appears to the student of Soviets as an inextricable cluster of paradoxes.

With such stories one can fill a book. But I shouldn't advise publishing the book. It may boomerang, and sadder stories would be told about us, the teachers of Slavics. I am afraid that we have only ourselves to blame for the situation just described.

III

At this point a little history is appropriate.

Until lately, we concentrated on teaching language on the one hand, and history and literature on the other. If we did not display much imagination, competence, and enterprising spirit, this was not entirely our fault. Before 1914, only three American colleges were giving regular instruction in Russian. While teachers of French, German, and Spanish farmed with most modern equipment, we had to work our field with spades and pick-axes in the later years. There were many who had never known how to handle even these tools. Having been born in Russia was often their only qualification for a teacher's position. They were pioneering in a field and climate unknown to them. True, they learned quickly from experience. They even wrote textbooks. It is easy to criticize their work, but good things also were achieved. There are able people among us and their efforts inspire respect and admiration. Hundreds of Americans have learned Russian; we could not possibly expect a better harvest.

The war gave a tremendous momentum to the instruction in Russian, and we are better off now in both method and equipment. According to the survey made by Professor Arthur P. Coleman, Russian was taught in more than 200 American colleges last year.[1] Only a few, however, have been able to maintain, develop, and improve the intensive wartime techniques. In most cases we still have to labor with spade and pick-ax. Instructors who have no adequate preparation still have no place to go for a "refresher

[1] *A Report on the Status of Russian and Other Slavic and East European Languages in the Educational Institutions of the United States, Its Territories, Possessions and Mandates, with Additional Data on Similar Studies in Canada and Latin America*, by Arthur Prudden Coleman, Assistant Professor, Department of Slavic Languages, Columbia University (New York, 1948), 109 pp.

course." American universities prepare excellent teachers of French, of German, and of Spanish, but they leave the Russian teacher to fend for himself. As a result, Russian students in certain colleges find themselves at a disadvantage when they apply for foreign service.

Perhaps more precarious is the situation in the field of history and literature. True, Professor Coleman's survey has recorded important quantitative gains since the war. Russian history was taught in 81, and Russian literature in 44, American and Canadian colleges last year. More often than not, however, a course in Russian history will concentrate on the Imperial period and cover the Soviet Revolution only slightly, if at all. Likewise, a course in Russian literature usually will be a course in writings from the nineteenth century up to World War I. History is presented as a story of emperors, conquests, and invasions, and literature as a catalogue of poets, novelists, and playwrights—both programs ending with the Revolution. Some instructors even make it clear that there has been no Russian literature since 1917.

What is the student to know about sociological and psychological conditions that made the Soviet Revolution possible and successful? At a final examination, he would have to answer such questions as these: *Describe the death of Dostoevski and that of Turgenev. Give the hour, day, month, and year. Describe and discuss their respective funerals and evaluate their positions in Russian literature;* and these: *Which feature of the murder trial is a first in Russian literature? When and where was the novel published? Serially? In book form?* Still another: *When was Turgenev's "A Month in the Country" first produced? Who was the famous actress who enacted first Verochka and later Natalia Petrovna? How many times?* The questions follow a pattern well known before the introduction of Slavic studies to this country. (Don't you remember: *Give the names of all the kings in the plays of Shakespeare?*)

Seldom is an attempt made to pierce the Russian mind, let alone a sociological examination. History and literature are treated as disciplines sufficient to themselves, disconnected from life, and entirely separated from problems of our day. A literary critic, a former teacher himself, deplores the translation of Vyshinski's book *The Law of the Soviet State* into English, because it gives a

distorted picture of Russian culture, and of the history of Russian juridical thought in particular. That is true, of course. But one must not confuse scientific objectivity with lifeless neutrality. The translator and the publisher realize that the American wants to know present Russia as well.

Thus two concepts of Russia are presented. On the one hand, a historical nation in its relation to world culture and, on the other hand, a modern political power in its relation to world affairs. The student learns from us the important heritage of the Russian past. But when he wants to know how the heritage is being spent, we tell him that this is another story. Two Russias appear before the American, separated and independent from each other. Can we wonder that life begins for him precisely where it ends for some of us?

IV

To fill the gap, Russian area studies emerged during the war. The pendulum shifted to the other extreme: if the Slavic studies showed no interest in the present, so the regional studies ignored the relevant past. At the time, this was explained by conditions of emergency. But the pendulum stuck, and did not swing back immediately after the war. On the contrary, more colleges offer courses in Soviet Literature, Soviet Drama, Twentieth Century Russian History, Soviet Economics, Soviet Law, Soviet Social Institutions, and the like, for enrollment in which no knowledge of Russian history or literature is required.

Who is to teach these courses? In many cases, instructors have had contact with the subject only via the English printed page and, as it often has been pointed out, it makes a certain difference whether the pages are of Maurice Hindus and Frederic Shuman or of William Henry Chamberlin, David Dallin, and Max Eastman. In both cases, however, Soviet facts are interpreted in terms of American civilization and social science, and thus the point is often missed and the student misled. Miscarriages have become obvious.

It is significant and fortunate that the inadequacies of the two extremes were soon realized. This country requires that Russian studies serve a practical purpose, and neither Slavists nor social

scientists knew how to serve it. When the Slavist stops at the threshold of the Revolution because he is unable to explain it, his science is moonshine; and so is social science which is limited to a description of the Soviet mechanism. Of course, studies of Imperial Russia, of the Revolutionary Movement, the Stalin Constitution, the Blueprints of the Five-Year Plans, and the Social Changes in the Soviet Union within the last decade increase our factual knowledge. Out of historical context, they contribute little to our understanding.

Communism can be profitably studied only against its own background, which is formed by the inheritance, environment, and experience of the peoples. The Russian situation confronts us with a series of questions to which we shall find no correct answers unless, paraphrasing Henry Steele Commager, we realize that answers are dictated by the Russian past and the Russian character. One cannot make sense of Soviet aims and behavior unless one knows how the peoples of the Soviet Union regard their own history and manifest destiny, and how they look at themselves. We knew German history and literature, and we also knew the Nazi political mechanism, but only a few were able to bridge their knowledge, and foresee. We knew all the political and economic facts about prewar Japan, and how did it serve us? Mistakes of that sort are paid for dearly.

America faces the same problem again: What to teach about Russia? How to teach it? Who can teach it?

V

The sociologist and the Slavist must come out of their ivory towers, and join hands. For the Slavist, the problem is to connect history, literature, and linguistics with life. For the social scientist, it is to realize that the statistical approach can be but a temporary expedient.

There is evidence that they both are beginning to get rid of their respective biases. Harvard University was the first institution, as far as this writer knows, to grant a Ph.D. degree in *Sociology and Slavics* three years ago. Other plans are in operation, or in preparation, and they tend to one goal: study of Russian life as a whole. The purpose is to cover all the aspects of Russian behavior in order

to discover its regularities and continuum. History is treated as a process, not a series of static periods. The student will not only be able to describe the Soviet machine in operation, but can also see the forces which produced it, and which maintain it alongside with the *MVD*. If something happens to the 1949 model, he will not have to run to the nearest fix-it shop. Trained appropriately, he will be able to deal with changing as well as with static situations in the Soviet Slavic world.

The new trend, struggling against the two extremes, is slowly taking shape. The first full course in Russian Civilization was introduced at Wheaton College, (Massachusetts) in 1945–46. Last year, twenty-five American colleges were engaged in a similar venture. The process is spontaneous. Let us briefly examine its heartening characteristics.

Integration of Russian studies, undertaken by a few progressive colleges, falls into two different patterns: (1) a Soviet area program when the budget, library, and personnel facilities permit it, and (2) a comprehensive course in Russian Civilization when facilities are limited to one or two competent men on the faculty. Not all the colleges answered my inquiry about the new organization of their programs, and my information is by no means complete. In some cases, it would seem, a course in Russian Civilization is still primarily a course in political history or in literature, and such topics as geography, government, peoples, foreign policy, religion, economics, education, law, arts and sciences, are left out. Instructors complain that they were not able to overcome the resistance of other departments where Russian subjects seem to be deaf-mute and very dear stepchildren. The integration is partial, but there is hope for the future.

In some other cases, however, we can see a successful attempt to integrate Russian life, from the beginnings of the Russian State to our day. This does not mean that contradictions and paradoxes are eliminated. On the contrary, they are presented in their interaction, and explained. The well informed student is able to form his own opinion. At Stanford University a course in Russian Civilization includes a survey of geography and history, peoples and institutions, religion and philosophy, language and literature, art and music, about fifty lectures in all; it is offered at the beginning

of the academic year to give the student an opportunity "to find out which of the above topics he would prefer for a more advanced study." At Wheaton College, a full-year course covers such subjects as the origins of the Slavs, the growth of the Russian State, geography, demography, government, foreign policy, economics, law, literature, family, arts and sciences, religion, education, communism and nationalism. A Russian area course is given at Colgate University, where "once every other week," writes Professor Albert Parry, "all the eight area courses get together for a panel discussion." At Indiana University a course in Russian Civilization is offered every other year, and it includes communism, nationalism, religion, education, problems of national minorities, the judicial system, the press, theatre, sciences, art, music, and literature. A few years ago, these topics were entirely ignored by American schools.

The obvious shortcoming of the above programs (but perhaps their advantage, too) is that they are entirely determined by the competence and vision of an individual instructor. More important though less integrated is the organization of studies in larger institutions. Their Russian programs are usually supported with grants from endowments and foundations and, in general, operate as autonomous bodies such as the Russian Institute at Columbia University, the Committee of International and Regional Studies at Harvard University, the Slavic Institute at the University of California, the Board of Russian Studies at Syracuse University, and so on. They cut across the departmental lines, and the gaps are filled by specially appointed instructors or visiting lecturers. Greater facilities permit the covering of most aspects of Russian life with separate courses, the integration of which within the student's time has already become a difficult problem. It is complicated by language requirements getting higher each year, for more courses are based almost entirely on reading the Russian original material. A comprehensive program usually extends over two years, leading to a certificate in some institutions and to a Master's degree in some others.

It is interesting to note that both the single course and the area programs seem to compete in raising their scholastic requirements. At Harvard University, only the twenty best qualified applicants

are admitted to the Soviet Union program each year. Regardless of the credit obtained in class instruction, students are submitted to a general examination in Russian, written and oral, before taking their degrees. Various prerequisites have been set in other institutions to select students on both undergraduate and graduate levels: freshmen at Colgate University, and freshmen and sophomores at Wheaton College are excluded from Russian courses, and at the University of Miami admission is now "more and more by permission of the instructor." The tendency is toward elite rather than mass education in understanding the Soviet world.

Yet, the integration of studies still is far from being horizontally and vertically complete. In at least three universities, the Area study is paralleled by a Research Center working with it in a more or less close cooperation. But Slavic Departments, except for language instruction, seldom participate fully in the program. They still look askance at each other, and this is unfortunate. Indeed, only in a few cases has a full cooperation been achieved.

The Russian programs still struggle between the Charybdis of scholastic conservatism and the Scylla of facile pragmatism, but they are coming nearer to the goal. This country is in need of well prepared men to plan future relations with Russia. The quick specialist, though still in demand, is an obsolete model indeed. Two systems of teaching Russian Civilization, yesterday in opposition, seem to be merging into a sound and promising plan. Errors and mistakes will be committed, but the evidence is growing that common sense may win.

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